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## Saying NO To the Mega Prison

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## **“Saying NO to the mega prison”**

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## **“Saying NO to the mega prison”**

David Scott<sup>1</sup>

*This activist contribution draws upon the issues emphasised by abolitionist activists in their struggles throughout 2017 (and before) to challenge government plans to build six new mega prisons in England and Wales by 2020. This activist contribution focuses specifically on the arguments utilised by campaigners in one of the proposed sites for a new mega prison: Bickershaw, Wigan, Greater Manchester.*

Prisons are warehouse of suffering and death. In times of record prison populations it is essential that abolitionists not only search for the truth and thus challenge reformist epistemologies but also take direct action in the face of prison expansionist policies. One of the most immediate ethical and political demands facing the abolitionist today is how to effectively resist the ‘mega prison’. Liz Truss, then UK Justice Secretary, in November 2015 announced plans to build nine new mega prisons in England and Wales. This ambitious prison building programme has been allocated £1.3 billion funding by the Treasury and aims to redesign the penal estate so that it can increase prison capacity by “10,000 modern places” (Truss, 2015). This plan comes off the back of previous attempts to build ‘Titan’ prisons holding around 2,000 prisoners each, which were first mooted in by Lord Carter in 2007 though largely abandoned in 2009 when the MoJ encountered problems securing land. Despite this setback, a ‘Titan’ prison, HMP Berwyn in Wrexham, was eventually opened ten years later in February 2017.

Whilst the current ‘mega prisons’ were proposed initially in conjunction with the shutting down of a number of Victorian prisons (situated on expensive land, which could then be sold for private housing to recuperate initial expenditure on the new prisons), no details of prisons earmarked for closure have been revealed. The locations of two of the proposed new mega prisons were, however, announced in November 2016 and planning applications were rushed through in a matter of weeks for both prisons in the early months of 2017. They

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are Wellingborough, Northampton (see *Northants Telegraph*, 2017) and Glen Parva, Leicester (see *Leicester Mercury*, 2017). Both new mega prisons, each with capacity of over 1,200 prisoners, are to be built on sites of existing prisons. Learning from previous mistakes, this may be because the land of an existing prison is already owned by the MoJ.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017 the sites of four further ‘mega prisons’ were announced by the Government – Full Sutton, Yorkshire; Rochester, Kent; Port Talbot, South Wales; and Hindley, Greater Manchester (Travis, 2017a). Like Wellingborough and Glen Parva, two other mega prisons are also planned to be built on sites of existing prisons. At the time of writing – December 2017 – planning applications have been sought and secured for the building of the Yorkshire and Kent mega prisons. Although local anti-prison activist groups formed in each one of the six areas where the new mega prisons have been proposed, I want to focus here only the campaign revolving around the rebuilding of HMP Hindley, in Bickershaw, which is a small village in the borough of Wigan, Greater Manchester. The discussion below details the key arguments proposed by local campaigners to say NO to the mega prison in Wigan, which are punitive sentencing, social and economic inequalities and the toxicity of prison building (Scott 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

Although full details of the proposed redevelopment at HMP Hindley have not been made public, the new ‘mega prison’ will have capacity to hold at least 1,300 prisoners. As more than £250 million was allocated for the construction of HMP Berwyn (which has capacity for 2,106 prisoners) and around £170 million has been earmarked for the demolishing and rebuilding of HMP Wellingborough (which will have capacity for at least 1,600 prisoners), we can anticipate that the costs of redeveloping HMP Hindley will be well in excess of £100 million.

It is important at the outset to recognise, however, that resistance against the proposed new ‘mega prison’ in Wigan is not an isolated campaign, but rather part of a wider struggle for social justice. The UK governments’ prison-building plans must be understood within the context of the nationwide austerity package resulting in public service cutbacks, which are rapidly moving away from welfare interventions focussed on meeting need and towards an intensification of punishment and penal-orientated interventions, which aim to regulate, control and discipline difficult and vulnerable people in impoverished communities. What was formerly called NOMS (National Offender Management Service) and now called HMPPS (Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service) has itself faced significant budget cuts. Compared to 2010

costings in public sector prisons, NOMS/HMPPS had to make cuts to its previous £3.4 billion by £900 million – or 24% of its budget – by 2015 (Scott, 2017c: 6). This meant annual cuts of approximately £2,200 per prisoner compared to the start of this decade. Public sector prisons have increasingly started to resemble private sector counterparts in terms of staffing levels and resources. Whatever the government rhetoric about rehabilitation, reform and safety, the current rebuilding plan is all about saving money. It is about punishing people cheaper. Let us take HMP Berwyn, which opened in February 2017 as an example. It is estimated that the cost of a place for a prisoner in HMP Berwyn will be £14,000 p.a. This is *at least* £10,000 cheaper than the annual cost of a prisoner in a similar category of prison (ibid). For anyone whose question is how are we to achieve social justice, *prisons can never be part of the answer*.

At the same time as there has been pressure to generate cheaper prison places, there has also been a rise in political rhetoric invoking the principle of less eligibility. The doctrine of less eligibility is predicated on the assumption that harsh prison regimes will instil moral fibre, discipline and backbone into the criminal, thus eradicating the individual deficiencies that were major factors for his or her offence. The application of the doctrine of less eligibility therefore ensures that the upper margin of prison conditions is guaranteed not to rise above the worst material conditions in society as a whole and therefore, in times of social hardship, the rigours of penal discipline become more severe to prevent weakening its deterrent effect. Prisons have always been austere and harsh places and, as hardship grows on the outside, the calls are inevitably for cheaper and more basic prison regimes. The current investment in *modern prison places* is to ensure that prisons are cheaper in the future and are based on more austere and dehumanising regimes. Although the ideological veneer of ‘modernisation’ helps to cloak this cost-cutting exercise and may even be a way to silence dissent by giving the impression that modern prison building is a form of penal progress (Mathiesen, 2004), the proposals for low-frills mega prisons are undoubtedly closely connected with weaker welfare provision in society as a whole. In a famous and much used quote, the Russian Novelist Theodore Dostoevsky (cited in Scott, 2017c: 7) once said that “the degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons”. This statement has never been truer. We should recognise that the prison is an index of the health and welfare of our society as a whole.

This article starts by focussing on the local ‘crime’ rates and the dilapidated prison in Bickershaw, Wigan at the time that the new mega prison was announced, indicating that there is evidence that the current prison should

close. The discussion then takes into consideration the problematic nature and extent of punitive sentencing in the UK and Greater Manchester; evidencing the relationship between economic inequalities and prison sentences and the absence of any demand for a new prison in the Wigan Borough. The inverse relationship between imprisonment and welfare spending is then emphasised, situating this discussion within the context of local welfare cuts to education, healthcare and other social services and the harms of economic inequalities on the local community. The toxicity of the prison (and the literally toxic nature of the prison buildings and land surrounding the prison) and evidence of the damage a new mega prison will bring to local people is then explored. The article finishes with a discussion of some alternative social policies that could be advocated *in place* of building a new mega prison.

### **HMP Hindley: The Worst Prison in the Country**

HMP Hindley is a Category C adult male prison with significant problems. To put it bluntly, it is a human rights disaster. HMP Hindley is an affront to human dignity. It is degrading and dehumanising and violates basic human rights. In an inspection in November 2016, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons [HMCIP], Peter Clark, provided a damning report, indicating that the prison should close. "The regime at Hindley ... [is] possibly very worst the inspectors had ever seen of this type of prison" (HMCIP, 2016: 5). Of the current prison population in HMP Hindley, about 33 per cent are under 21; 27 per cent have a declared mental health problem; 40 per cent are currently on the drug treatment casework load; 16 per cent have developed a drug problem whilst in the prison; and only 14 per cent of those prisoners eligible to be so are currently in educational classes (ibid: 28-37).

Prisons are also characterised by institutionally-structured violence – that is the hidden and corrosive effects of living in an institution, which is deliberately designed to inflict pain and suffering (Scott, 2016a). By default, prisons deprive prisoners of basic human needs. But in seriously impoverished regimes like HMP Hindley levels of boredom and time consciousness are exacerbated through dull and impoverished regimes that fail to stimulate, educate or even deliver the minimum in terms of the vague Prison Service commitments. In such brutalising, punitive and dehumanising penal regimes, levels of human suffering may become insurmountable (Scott, 2017a; Scott and Codd, 2010).

There is virtually no purposeful activity and very little evidence of HMP Hindley meeting the basic requirements of what the HMCIP call a "healthy

prison". Prisoners live in "stark" unhealthy and unclean conditions. According to the November 2016 HMCIP Report the prison is "dirty, insufficiently furnished and poorly ventilated".

Cells were dirty, covered in graffiti and lacked basic amenities, including pillows, clean bedding, kettles and televisions. We saw one new arrival who was placed in a cell without a water supply ... Most communal areas were dirty and some landings, particularly on the upper floors, were filthy ... (ibid: 18)

There is a repressive and authoritarian staff culture. The prison is run on huge amounts of lockdown, which has "clearly inhibited development of positive relationships". Two thirds of prisoners are locked in their cells for 18 hours every day (ibid: 37). According to the HMCIP (2016: 12-13), "Prison officers were disinterested and relationships appeared distant". High numbers of prisoners feel unsafe, with many deliberately isolating themselves through fear. The HMCIP (2016: 12) note that in the period under consideration there were 126 incidents of "use of force" and 86 recorded incidents regarding the full use of "control and restraint". This is double the HMCIP norm. Batons were drawn on 17 occasions in the six months prior to the inspection. In November 2016 132 prisoners were in the segregation unit and one prisoner had been segregated for 79 days. HMP Hindley is undoubtedly seeped in fear, intimidation, bullying and interpersonal physical violence (ibid). The HMCIP Report (2016: 19) also pointed to the high levels of self-harm and that lessons following the self-inflicted death of Jake Hardy in 2012 had not been learnt. In March 2017 Anthony Hill became the third prisoner in five years to take his own life at the prison. For the HMCIP, the "regime at Hindley is totally inadequate" (ibid: 37). It fails to fulfil its duty of care. It is a blot on the landscape. As a place of violence, suffering and death, HMP Hindley should be closed at the first possible opportunity.

## Sentencing the Poor to a Life of Misery

The relationship between ‘crime’ and punishment is a complicated one. The first, and most crucial point, is that whilst prison populations have been rising since the mid-1990s, for much of the last 20 years recorded crime has been falling and increases in recorded ‘crime’ the last two years remain modest. Given the abysmal recidivism rates following imprisonment, we can rule out immediately that this is because of the rise in the prison population. Prisons are more likely to generate criminality than act as conduits for rehabilitation (Scott, 2008c).

Though there is some evidence that recorded crime has increased in Greater Manchester in the last two years (UK Crime Statistics, 2016) – 216,493 crimes were reported last year (2016), up 18,907 on the previous year (2015) – this rise must be understood in the context of problematic recording practices in the past, both at local and national level. In 2014 the Police Service lost its ‘national statistics status’ because of quality issues regarding the recording of crime data, and in Greater Manchester Government inspectors (Justice Inspectorate, 2016) have questioned the integrity of policing recording practices, especially when it comes to the long-term under-recording of data on sexual and interpersonal violence. Therefore the alarming 30 per cent increase in the level of reporting of sexual offences (from 473 in the 12 months to March 2015 to 615 in the 12 months to March 2016) in Wigan itself must be considered within the context of significant under-recording of similar ‘crimes’ in the past. Further, data from 2016 indicates that Wigan Borough has the lowest homicide, attempted murder and conspiracy to murder rates per year in Greater Manchester at 1.5 per 1000,000 of the population. Indeed *Wigan Council Strategic Plan* (Wigan Borough Council, 2011, cited in Scott, 2017b: 10) notes that only 17 per cent of violent crime in Wigan is committed by a stranger.

A large proportion of violent crime occurs in “night spots” of the town centres where a lot of heavy drinking occurs on weekend evenings. Most violent crime victims are males aged 17-24 year ....  
*Recommendation 30: Publicise the very low risk of being the victim of violent crime by stranger.* (emphasis in original)

There is then no apparent relationship between the ‘crime’ rate and the building of a new mega prison. Sentencing data in Wigan Borough also indicates that there is no pressing need to increase prison capacity in the area. In fact, the data shows the opposite. Although the number of people from Wigan receiving



prison sentences has increased by 15 per cent in the last two years, in March 2017 there were 428 people in prison from Wigan Local Authority (to be specific, 409 prisoners with an address in Wigan and 19 prisoners who were homeless at the time of sentencing who gave Wigan Court as their address). This number is significantly below the existing capacity at HMP Hindley – on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2017 there were 593 prisoners in HMP Hindley. There is then no direct demand with regards to the sentencing of people to prison from the Wigan Borough to increase the capacity of HMP Hindley.

We when look more broadly at sentencing practices however, a different picture emerges. The rate of incarceration in England and Wales is 146 per 100,000 of the population. However, the rate of imprisonment of people from Greater Manchester is much higher at 193 per 100,000. If sentencing were to fall in line with the national average, there would be 1,300 fewer prisoners from Greater Manchester. This indicates that prisons in the region could close if only we had more sensible rates of incarceration. Instead of planning a new ‘mega prison’ there should instead be an immediate moratorium on prison building. That money can be made available for large-scale prison building in a time of austerity and increasing economic inequality, however, should come as no surprise to penologists. It has long been established that reduced welfare spending directly correlates with increases in prison sentences (Downes and Hanson, 2006a; Scott, 2013e) There is also a direct correlation between economically deprived areas in the UK and prison sentences. The most deprived areas – that is those with the greatest welfare need – have some of the highest rates of imprisonment in the country, whilst the least deprived areas in the country have remarkably low incarceration rates. To briefly illustrate this relationship, let me here just focus on six areas (out of the top ten least and most deprived areas) in recent times.<sup>2</sup>

In the tables below, we see figures from some of the most deprived areas in the country in 2015. In the most deprived areas – such as Liverpool and Manchester – the data shows that these areas have sentencing rates over 440 per 100,000. By contrast, in some of the least deprived areas – such as Rushcliffe, Mid Sussex and Workingham – the data shows that these areas have rates of less than 40 per 100,000. Data on the rate of imprisonment within the most deprived local authority areas in England is at least *six times greater* than the rate within the least deprived local authority areas in England although, as we can see above, sometimes it is much higher than this.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Dr Robert Jones, University of South Wales, for sharing information collated from Freedom of Information [FOI] Requests (Jones, 2015).

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Prisoner Numbers</b>	<b>Per 100,000</b>	<b>Rate</b>
Knowsley	147,231	311	1.47231	211.23
Liverpool	478,580	2133	4.7858	445.69
Manchester	530,292	2542	5.30292	479.35

**Table 1a: Examples of prison rates in the most deprived areas**

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Prisoner Numbers</b>	<b>Per 100,000</b>	<b>Rate</b>
Rushcliffe	114,474	33	1.14474	28.82
Mid Sussex	145,651	40	1.45651	27.46
Wokingham	160,409	57	1.6	35.53

**Table 1b: Examples of prison rates in the least deprived areas**

### **Welfare Cuts and Prison Bruises**

Prisons are places that take things away from people: they take a person's time, relationships, opportunities, and sometimes their life. Prisons constrain human identity and foster feelings of fear, anger, alienation and social and emotional isolation. Therefore, it is essential that we take a holistic view and look closely at the people who break the law and start to understand the trauma, hardship and injury that people have experienced throughout their life-course (Ezorsky, 1972). Most prisoners are people who have already been failed by society. Prisons become a default form of warehousing some of the most troubled and troublesome people in the community. The welfare of those most in need is missed, neglected or ignored in the wider community and only becomes highlighted as a problem when those people are sent to prison. A very large number of the people we send to prison have grown up in care homes; experienced abuse as a child or witnessed familiar violence; can barely read or write and have been expelled or truanted from school; were unemployed or on benefits before imprisonment; and have multiple and often serious mental health problems. Most prisoners, when released back into the community after they have experienced the trauma, hardship and violence of imprisonment find it hard to readjust. Rather than reducing 'crime' in local communities, prisons actually lead to increases in 'crime' and also escalate a sense of insecurity amongst other members. When a society is looking to cut back on welfare and

allow growing social and economic inequalities, not only are the most vulnerable and excluded failed in society, but there is increasing emphasis on prisons as the answer to social problems (Scott, 2017c).

Welfare and punishment (imprisonment rates) are then two sides of the same coin. It is essential that at same time as saying YES to increasing budgets for vital front-line welfare services we also say NO to the prison and associated policies that only deliver “welfare through punishment” (Scott, 2008). To realise a decent society, where everyone has a chance to prosper and fulfil their potential and where people with physical, emotional and psychological difficulties are treated with dignity and respect, requires solidarity and a collective call for not only a reversal of austerity and welfare cuts but also for a reversal in the recent rise in prison populations. We need to stand *against imprisonment* and *against social and economic inequalities*.

In Wigan Borough in 2015 18.8 per cent of children (12,875) lived in poverty (Wigan Borough Council, 2016: 1). 20 per cent of children live in families that claim out-of-work benefits. Worklessness is the main cause of child poverty. There are two foodbanks in Wigan, which are a modern index of poverty. The median gross weekly pay (pw) of full time employees in Wigan is £427.50 pw. In the Northwest it is £460.30 pw. Nationally it is £507.20 pw (ibid). Life expectancy in Wigan Borough is lower than the average for England and Wales for both men and women. There are significant variations in the health of people in Wigan, but according to Wigan Borough Council (2011, cited in Scott, 2017b: 12) life expectancy (for ‘able bodied’/non-disabled) at the bottom end of the life expectancy scale varies from *as low* as 47 years in men and 51 years in women in the poorest areas to 62 for men and 65 for women in the most affluent area. Life expectancy for people with severe mental illness is up to 25 years less than that of the general population. Wigan Leaders Group (2016, cited in Scott, 2017b: 13) also identified a major shortfall in funding for local health services, facilitating the health and well-being of people in the borough of Wigan.

Our analysis shows that by 2020/21 commissioning organisations in Wigan Borough will have a total *cumulative* saving requirement of £136m. £60m of savings have been identified to close this gap, leaving a shortfall of £76m. This gap will be met by schemes yet to be identified .... (emphasis in original)

There is also a crisis of funding for schools in Wigan. Under the new National Funding Formula, Wigan schools will be the 109th poorest funded in the

country. There will be an 8% reduction in funding for school children between 2014-15 and 2019-20. The Wigan Schools Forum (2017: 1) inform us that:

Under the new Formula from April 2017, 88 out of 99 primary schools and all secondary schools in the Borough will receive less funding than in 2016-17.

A new mega prison will only exacerbate rather than alleviate such profound economic inequalities. Prisons are one way of regulating the poor – for indeed the vast majority of people sent to prison are from socially-excluded backgrounds who have experienced many different challenges and problems in life prior to incarceration. Building a new prison is not just about putting money into the pain infliction industry – it is also about shifting focus away from welfare support. Building new prisons is therefore a serious and immediate threat to the welfare services available for everyone in the wider community.

### **The Toxic Mega Prison**

The toxicity of the new mega prison in Bickershaw, Wigan can be surveyed on a number of different levels: in terms of prisoners; the toxicity of the proposed site; and the toxic impact it will have on the local community. Let us briefly consider each of these in turn.

#### *Toxicity for prisoners*

When the original ideas for the mega prisons were first mooted about ten years ago, they were referred to as “Titan prisons”. There was a broad based penological consensus that this was a bad idea and the plans were largely abandoned in 2009. Speaking at the time, David Cameron (cited in Carter, 2009), who was then leader of the opposition Conservative Party, stated that the “idea that big is beautiful with prisons is wrong”. Indeed, for him mega prisons are ‘dangerous and inefficient’ and a ‘bad idea’. Although there is not a great deal of existing research evaluating ‘mega prisons’, we do know that they are likely to be much more damaging to human wellbeing than smaller prisons. In the UK, when looking at HMCIP reports, larger prisons are significantly less likely to achieve ‘good’ scores on safety and respect. According to research published by Madoc-Jones, Williams, Hughes and Turley (2016) “mega prisons” are much less likely to be considered as safe and controlled environments. According to their analysis of the data, HMCIP inspection reports on larger prisons are 5 times less likely to be considered as meeting basic requirements

of a healthy prison and 7 times less likely to be considered as safe. Relationships between prisoners and prison officers are also much weaker, indicating an increased *width of relationships*, which produce a greater sense of social distance between the two groups. This may lead to more entrenched hostility. The larger the prison then the more likely that it will be an unhealthy prison.

There undoubtedly are a wide range of unintended harmful effects of mega prisons, most notably increased mental health problems. Prisoners are perhaps even more damaged in larger prisons than in smaller prisons; therefore confinement in a mega prison may result in increasing risks to public safety. Recidivism rates also appear to be higher in mega prisons (Madoc-Jones, *et al.*, 2016). They are simply ways of warehousing unwanted populations. When considered within the context of their broader negative impact on the wider community of increased recidivism, it becomes obvious that although mega are cheaper than other prisons to run, society ultimately incurs great costs at their expense.

#### *Toxicity of the land*

One of the main concerns highlighted in the campaign against the Hindley mega prison by both local residents and the local community is the presence of asbestos in the prison and asbestos contamination of the land surrounding the prison. From 1949 to the mid-1970s a large *Turner and Newall* asbestos factory was situated only a few hundred meters away from where HMP Hindley is currently situated. The building of HMP Hindley was completed in 1961, but for the previous 12 years the prison land was open to exposure from airborne asbestos from the factory. In 1979 there was an enormous fire at the *Turner and Newall* factory and the spread of airborne asbestos to the surrounding area was undoubtedly enormous. Although no records remain following the fire, anecdotal evidence from local residents also points to extensive asbestos land dumps in the area, which would also have likely spread asbestos contamination around the local area. In the time following the closure of the factory a number of local residents contracted asbestosis and mesothelioma, a form of cancer associated with asbestos contamination.

Freedom of Information [FOI] requests (Scott, 2017e) have also confirmed that asbestos exists in the fabric of the prison building. Although in the 1990s asbestos was removed from the roofs on A, B, C and D wings in HMP Hindley, there is still a vast amount of asbestos in the older 1960s buildings. Asbestos becomes a serious health risk if fibres are released into the air. The *Control of Asbestos Regulations* (HM Government, 2012) stipulates that before any

building work can be undertaken in areas that might contain asbestos, there is a legal obligation to identify where the asbestos is, together with its type and condition. There is then an obligation to assess the risks and subsequently manage and control them. Before demolishing existing prisons, the MoJ must undertake refurbishment and demolition surveys (which will require the contractors to visit prisons and sample the asbestos). If findings of the risk assessments regarding any disturbance or deterioration of the asbestos in prison or in the land beneath it, independent assessments indicate that the costs for removal of the asbestos could cost up to £0.5 million. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the problem of asbestos has generated concern, anger and anxiety among local people about the possible toxicity of the prison land itself.

#### *Toxicity for the community*

Despite government rhetoric, we can dismiss any talk that the rebuilding of Hindley will create jobs and prosperity in Bickershaw or the surrounding area. There have been a number of very detailed studies in the USA exploring the relationship between prison towns and economic growth. King, Mauer and Huling (2003) found that residents living in areas where there were new prisons did not gain significant employment advantages compared to those living in areas where there were no prisons. In other words, unemployment rates, wages and overall incomes between prison towns and other comparable areas without a prison were virtually the same. When comparing new prison towns across the USA with other towns of a similar size, Besser and Hanson (2004) also found that there were no discernable differences between unemployment rates from 1990-2000 between the towns. At a similar time to the above studies, there was a further comprehensive analysis of prison towns in the USA by Hooks, Mosher, Rotolo and Lobao (2004) who explored the impact of prison building and job growth in the USA from 1976-1994. In a follow-up study, expanding the period to 2004, Hooks, Mosher, Genter, Rotolo and Lobao (2010) found once again that the evidence shows that rather than promoting economic prosperity and creating new jobs, in both urban and struggling rural communities, prisons may actually impede employment growth. Hooks *et al.*, (2010) conclude that “our research into employment growth suggests that prisons are doing more harm than good among vulnerable counties”. The reasons why prisons failed to provide economic stimulus to the local economy include:

- There are not necessarily new jobs as prison officers moved from other prisons to fill the jobs created at the newly built prison;

- There is the possibility of adverse local impacts of prison labour through prison industries and low-cost prisoner labour;
- There may be a paucity of local skills or direct connections between local skills and the services required by the new prison.

It is now well-documented that prisoners have much greater health problems than most people in society (Scott, 2008a). The two most often discussed are mental health problems and substance/drug usage. The last major official government report indicated that 80 per cent of prisoners had mental health problems (Scott and Codd, 2010). The most recent study published on prisoner mental health on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2016, found that 69.1 per cent of prisoners had two or more psychiatric disorders – what the authors refer to as *co-morbidity* (Bebington, McKenzie, Iveson, Duffieldm, Kerr, Killaspy and Jakobiwitz, 2016). As prisoners have higher rates of physical and mental illness, this places increased stress on local National Health Service resources, which can actually lead to an impoverishment of health provision in the wider community and, in the long-term, local health provision will be drained. A larger prison in Bickershaw, Wigan will seriously undermine mental health provision and place greater stress on the ambulance service. More prisons will mean more pressure on the ambulance service. There has been overall a 52 per cent rise in emergency services callouts to prisons since 2011. It costs £300 for each ambulance call-out and the bill for ambulance call-outs to prisons in 2014-15 was £2.3 million (BBC, 2016a). In the four male prisons in Greater Manchester, from February 2016-February 2017, the ambulance service responded to 551 incidents, costing the local NHS £165,000. If HMP Hindley is to double in size, the local NHS would be drained of more than £40,000 every year for this service alone.

Drugs and substance use are also central to the current media narrative on the prison place. Focus has primarily been on psychoactive drugs like Black Mamba and (formerly) legal highs. Revelations in the media in recent months have pointed to the large number of times ambulances have been called to prisons to deal with drug overdoses. Prison officers and prisoners have come to call ambulances the ‘mambulance’ because of the connection with the harm generated by taking the substance. This is something specifically generated by the prison place itself. Prisoners have always taken illicit substances of some sort or other (in the past it was cigarettes and alcohol so it is only the illicit substance that has changed in the last 150 years). The reason why is because drug taking is an essential part of coping with the prison place. Illicit substances (drugs such as cannabis) can help prisoners manage time. It can help them

sleep. It can help them forget that they are living such a stark, mundane and boring existence. Whilst we have prisons, we will have drug taking – the loneliness and isolation of the prison generates demand for drugs (Scott, 2017f).

Harms are also felt outside of the local community surrounding the prison site itself. With more prisoners there are more children left without fathers or mothers. Children can end up in care, or face neglect, or struggle to cope with life due to the trauma of the loss of a parent/significant adult. This can impact directly on other members of the community through problematic behaviour by the child at home or difficulties at school. Elders can also be left without carers. Other members of the family, such as partners, may suffer financial hardship if the main breadwinner is imprisoned. As prisons are also directed primarily at controlling young men, this can result in communities near prisons suffering from a local shortage of adult men. As Richie (2012) found in her research in the United States, the consequences of this can be very harsh on women in the community, as often the under-supply of single men compared to single women, especially in late teens and early twenties, can result in men treating women with less respect. Prison damages human relationships and undermines an ethics of care. Further, prisons have not proved to be very effective in terms of boosting community safety (Scott, 2017a).

### **Invest in Communities, not Prisons**

I have attempted in this article to visibilise the hideously ugly reality of the prison; and especially the mega prison. But what can those opposed to the Government Prison Building Programme *do right now*? Well, we can start by simply telling people that we know about the harm that new prisons will create. This can be to friends, family, work colleagues, neighbours, other members of local communities and the local press. We must get a message out acknowledging just how dangerous and counterproductive prisons are and always have been for the people they house, those that house them, and local people. We can also focus on building a deeper culture of democratic accountability among local communities. Building democracy and ‘people power’ should be part of any constructive way forward. Together we can also try to encourage and embolden local people to have the political courage and will to directly engage and participate in trying to solve the problems we face in our communities without recourse to prison or punishment.

To address wrongdoing and problematic human behaviour, we need a genuine emphasis on community safety and rehabilitation. We should though



focus on interventions that have a proven track record of addressing problematic conduct rather than simply regurgitating a failed and failing institution: the prison. We need to make healthcare and education our priorities right now to help prevent future problems. Building prisons rather than investing in welfare services simply generates new and deeper problems that we as a society will have to spend enormous amounts of money on in 10 to 15 years-time. Prevention is better than cure.

As mentioned earlier, it is essential that we understand people who break the law through their 'life-course' (that is, we need to consider their experiences across their whole lives rather than just the criminal act itself). This means spending the time learning about and understanding *who* breaks the law and *who* is criminalised. It also means that if we care about the harms that are faced by children, we should also be concerned about these very same people when they grow up into adults. Just because their childhood is complicated, problematic, and they may have become difficult people because of the problems they have faced, doesn't have to mean that their adult lives should be written off. Rather, we need to look at these issues and press home right now why it is so important to have decent care for all children, the need to abolish child poverty and to have decent welfare support for all so that they can care adequately for their own children. The children who are harmed today will be the adults filling our prisons tomorrow.

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